

**DECISION NOTICE
AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)
WOODY RIDGE
FOREST RESTORATION
PROJECT**

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

**Coconino National Forest
USDA Forest Service
Coconino County, Arizona**

DECISION

I am pleased to announce that we have completed the detailed analysis process and Environmental Assessment for the Woody Ridge Forest Restoration Project. It is my decision to implement a suite of activities that help reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire and improve forest health. These activities help restore the natural landscape and provide for human uses. The result will be a forest where low intensity fire is more likely to occur thereby replacing fire's natural role. Vegetative diversity is enhanced as activities achieve, more grassy openings, future young trees, future large old trees, a well maintained and located road system, trails and camping areas that reduce erosion and soil compaction.

Most importantly, if a crown fire occurs and travels towards the communities of Flagstaff, suppression efforts are much more likely to be successful. This is because areas between Woody Ridge and communities will have a high likelihood of transforming a running crown fire to a ground fire, with flame lengths low enough for suppression forces to take effective action. This may not mean less fire, but it does mean different, low intensity fire. In addition, many of the treated stands will be less likely to initiate a crown fire in the first place.

Travelways are restored for Pronghorn Antelope and black bear. Mexican spotted owl nesting areas are maintained, and the likelihood of losing these nest habitats to wildfire is lessened. The juxtaposition of forage to cover is enhanced for turkey, Abert squirrel and northern goshawks. As large old trees eventually die, there will be an abundance of future large trees providing habitat for a variety of birds, bats and insects. Species that rely on native grasses and forbs in open areas have more habitats available.

The Woody Ridge FRP fits within regional priorities for action described in the Forest Service Region Strategic Action Plan. Three key elements of the action plan are, to Restore Ecological Functionality of Southwestern Forests and Rangelands, Contribute to the Economic Vitality of Communities and Assist in Protecting Communities Adjacent to National Forests. The Woody project contributes to these regional goals.

Implementing this decision does require some ground disturbing activities. Soil disturbance may result in some soil movement, however, given the nature of the soils that occur here, and best management practices employed, there is little likelihood of off-site soil erosion as a result of activities. Trails and roads will be improved to meet design standards that limit erosion. To access stands, some temporary roads will be re-opened or newly constructed. These will be closed out and re-vegetated after use. In areas with high densities of nonnative and invasive plants, there may be an increase in undesirable weeds. However, design features include measures to prevent spread. In other areas, weeds will be eradicated as a part of project design. Activities may disturb wildlife with noise and human presence, but this disturbance is short-term. Many trees will be cut and removed, and by doing so, the trees left standing will have room to grow.

I would like to thank everyone who participated in this planning effort. In addition, the cooperative effort with the Great Flagstaff Forests Partnership has been valuable in expanding public information, and working to develop markets for small diameter trees.

This Decision Notice contains my decision on a selected alternative and describes my rationale for selecting it. Supporting information is located in the Environmental Assessment. A Notice of Decision will be published in the Arizona Daily Sun beginning a 45-day appeal period. Copies of the EA and this Decision Notice are available upon request from the Peaks Ranger District Office.

The Woody Ridge Forest Restoration Project (Woody Ridge FRP) is located southwest of the community of Flagstaff (See Map A).

ALTERNATIVE A – SELECTED ALTERNATIVE

Below is a brief description of Alternative A. **Implementation must consider all the details described in the EA including the description of Alternative A and the Design Features/Mitigation Measures and Monitoring sections.**

Vegetation Treatments

Approximately 8599 acres will have vegetation treatments where activities include thinning and one or more of the following, slash piling, slash removal, chipping, and pile burning.

All treated areas have objectives for decreasing wildfire hazard potential and improving resistance to insects and disease. In some areas there is an emphasis on wildfire risk reduction. In others, wildfire risk reduction was tempered to provide for a variety of wildlife species in the Woody Ridge and Fry Canyon areas. A few areas have an emphasis on antelope habitat, which matches fire risk reduction goals. The table below describes the number of acres within each treatment emphasis.

ALTERNATIVE A	ACRES
Antelope Thin/Burn	1286
Burn Only	2945
MSO PAC Thin/Burn	71
PFA Thin/Burn	228
Target Thin/Burn	252
Turkey Thin/Burn	660
Fire Risk Reduction Thin/Burn	3494
Wildlife Movement Thin/Burn	89
Uneven Thin/Burn	2519

MSO PAC = Mexican Spotted Owl Protected Activity Center
PFA = northern goshawk post fledgling family area
Target = Mexican Spotted Owl Target Threshold habitat

Forest product removal (of any kind) is designed to maintain or restore ecosystem health and desired conditions.

Prescribed Fire

Approximately 2945 acres are slated for broadcast burning¹ only.

Approximately 8599 acres are slated for broadcast burning after thinning and slash disposal is complete. This low intensity prescribed burning would be conducted periodically (every 3 to 10 years) over many years as ‘maintenance burning’ to mimic fire’s natural role to cycle nutrients and to maintain wildfire risk reduction objectives. Burning may occur at any time of the year when winds, fuel moistures, humidity and other factors are suitable for burning.

Non-motorized Recreation Trails

Approximately 14.5 miles of new trail will be constructed. This includes 1.5 miles of foot trail within the Dry Lake Caldera and approximately 13 miles of multi-use non-motorized trail connecting communities to Fort Tuthill, the Arboretum and Rogers Lake. Approximately 3 miles of social trail around the Dry Lake Caldera will be obliterated.

Camping

Approximately 1068 acres will change from general dispersed camping to camping in designated sites only.

Recreation Settings

Alternative A will progress towards the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) objectives outlined in Amendment 17 of the Forest Plan by implementing road, trail and vegetation management actions that create the desired recreation settings. For example, within the Semi-primitive non-motorized objective areas, some roads are administratively closed.

A portion of the project area did not have ROS objectives previously identified. Alternative A

¹ Broadcast burning is a low intensity ground fire over a fairly large area. Fire is laid down in strips and allowed to creep across the landscape.

sets objectives for these acres. Based on comments received, adjustments have been made to the ROS objectives to match more closely with settings outside of the project area (see Map B).

Roads

Under Alternative A, there are approximately 56 miles of open road, 38 miles of which are for high clearance vehicles (Level II roads that are generally not surfaced) and 17 miles for passenger car travel (Level III generally surfaced). Approximately 1.14 miles of open road per 1 square mile section will be maintained. Approximately 5 miles of National Forest system road will be obliterated over time. Additional old temporary road beds, user-created roads, two tracks etc. may be obliterated over time, or may be evaluated as part of separate motorized recreation planning efforts². Roads to be obliterated may be converted to motorized or non-motorized trail if desirable to do so under a separate NEPA analysis. Gates will be maintained around the Woody Ridge semi-primitive non-motorized area. The area west of Westwood Estates accessed by the FR 68 will be gated and placed under an administrative closure. Multiple small segments of open road that pass through meadows will receive ‘turnpiking’³ and reconstruction to correct drainage (currently 2.4 miles of road reconstruction are identified). The large power line that runs through the project area will continue to have an open road underneath it that is very rocky and provides only unadvertised technical 4x4 opportunity.

Implementation

The Forest Service intends to undertake all project activities listed in the EA, however, grant or volunteer will be crucial to accomplishing tasks more quickly than may be the case under normal funding allocations. Implementation of these activities will vary. Thinning, burning and designating campsites will begin in 2005. It is expected that thinning will occur between 2005 and 2010. We anticipate that burning would occur over a 10-year period with maintenance burning expected to continue in later years. Road rehabilitation will be conducted together with thinning activities, or separately, as funds are available. Trail construction will occur, as funds are available, with trail completion likely before the close of the 10 years.

Prior and during project implementation, we will continue to involve and inform property owners, fire protection Districts and communities in the scheduling and impact (i.e. smoke from burning) of project activities.

My decision does not address private, State Trust, or other non-Forest Service lands.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED IN DETAIL

Alternative B - No Action

Under Alternative B, no thinning or prescribed burning would occur throughout most of the project area. A few places would continue to have broadcast burning as approved under earlier NEPA decisions. New Forest Service trails would not be planned or constructed and all social trail use would likely continue. The current road network would be in place and maintenance of

² Non-system roads may be evaluated as a result of the Cross Country Use of Motorized Vehicles in Five National Forests Environmental Impact Statement.

³ Turnpiking refers to building up the roadbed with a surfacing material and constructing drainage features.

open Forest Service roads would take place as part of the regular District maintenance schedule. Few roads would be obliterated. The administrative closure gates would remain in place where they currently occur. Dispersed camping continues to occur throughout the project area. Some weed eradication may occur through forest-wide volunteer efforts.

Alternative C – 16-inch cap

Alternative C would be the same as Alternative A except a 16-inch cap would be placed on all thinning activities.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND SCOPING

The Greater Flagstaff Forest Partnership (a nonprofit organization) and the Coconino National Forest have established a Memorandum of Understanding to work together to demonstrate new forest management approaches in improving and restoring the ecosystem health of the ponderosa pine forest ecosystem where urbanized areas interface with National Forest lands.

Members of the Greater Flagstaff Forest Partnership participated in describing existing and desired conditions for the project area and developed a list of management actions that might be undertaken.

This project was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions. One Proposed Action Scoping Letter was mailed in May of 2002 to a mailing list of people who expressed interest in the project, or who were otherwise determined to be interested or affected (adjacent landowners, organizations, agencies). One Open House was held at City Hall on Wednesday, May 21st from 6:30 to 8:30. At the open house, large-scale maps were displayed and FS staff were on hand to answer questions. At the open house, the Greater Flagstaff Forest Partnership provided a table display about the organization. A short article and notice for the meeting printed in the Arizona Daily Sun on May 9th. Approximately 25 people attended the open house and 12 signed the sign in sheet. A PowerPoint presentation was given (PRD#86). In response to the proposed action, one individual from MCS Stables visited the Peaks District Office to discuss the project and pick up a copy of the proposed action.

In the early part of July a field trip was held in the Dry Lake Caldera area with various individuals and agency representatives (PRD #101). In addition, one field review occurred with Arizona Game and Fish Department personnel to discuss antelope habitat (PRD #103). In August, staff from the Arboretum met to discuss the project (PRD #114).

Each comment letter was reviewed and the various points in each letter were listed. Two letters supported the project as proposed, three letters provided comments on roads, one letter focused on the Dry Lake Caldera, seven letters focused on vegetation management with some comments on trails and roads. One letter asked for additional information related to trails. Many comments were carried forward into the discussions of Chapter 3 as routine analysis conducted by the interdisciplinary team, and many comments were addressed through design features added to, or already a part of, the project. Because of concerns for Abert squirrel habitat, additional analysis was conducted that resulted in an alternative considered but not analyzed in detail. Comments

related to a 16-inch limit on the size of trees to be cut were provided in one letter and lead to the development of Alternative C.

A draft Environmental Assessment was made available, and on January 16th, 2004 a formal comment period was initiated. The following week, a letter was mailed to US Fish and Wildlife Service requesting informal consultation related to threatened species. Three e-mails requested copies of the EA. One e-mail requested additional information, which was provided. At the close of the comment period, 5 letters were received.

All comments received whether in response to the proposed action or the EA were considered in this decision.

RATIONALE FOR CHOOSING ALTERNATIVE A

I have selected Alternative A because it will best reduce fire hazard and restore ecosystem health.

Under Alternative A, flame lengths are reduced to less than 4 feet in areas with a fire risk reduction emphasis. These stands, near communities and along the 89A corridor comprise an important zone of protection for Flagstaff. Alternative A also maintains dense forest habitat along the steep slopes and top of Woody Ridge, where turkey, bear and Mexican spotted owl require denser forests and less human disturbance. Given the location of Woody Ridge, it is critical to transform a crown fire that might enter into or begin on Woody Ridge to ground fire **before** it has the opportunity to reach (or send spot fires into) communities.

Reducing fire hazard is not without other ecosystem benefits. Stands with a fire risk reduction emphasis will support a variety of wildlife species, and especially benefit grass dependent species such as voles, mice, insects, butterflies, elk and antelope. Current tree growth is slow and resistance to insect and disease outbreaks is low. To decrease competition between trees means faster growth, more large trees for the future and greater resistance to insects and disease (i.e. forest restoration).

Alternative C does not go far enough to reduce fire hazard. When a cap is imposed, 637 acres will have canopy closure and crown bulk density that increases the possibility of sustaining a crown fire. Even though ladder fuels, dead and down fuels and the total stems per acre are reduced under both Alternatives, the resulting canopy closure on the 637 acres does not meet fire hazard reduction objectives. One of these areas is adjacent to Hwy 89A with a high risk of human caused ignitions, and with nearby stands with conditions that could initiate a crown fire.

Alternative B does not reduce fire hazard on the project area.

Both of the action Alternatives progress towards future forest structures with an increased amount of large trees. Currently it is estimated that only 4% of the forested acres support trees 18-23.9 inches (VSS⁴ 5). In 20 years this is expected to rise to 32%. On the other end of the

⁴ Vegetative Structural Stage

spectrum, there is currently less than 1% of the area with open areas for new seedlings and saplings (VSS 1). This is expected to increase to 14%. Under Alternative C, it is estimated that future seedling/sapling areas would be $\frac{1}{4}$ less than Alternative A. Under Alternative B, there would be little growth towards larger trees.

Another important aspect of forest restoration is to reduce the risk of insect and disease mortality. Although natural agents of change, current tree densities are beyond what likely occurred under a more frequent, low intensity fire ecosystem. Stress related mortality risk operates more at the threshold level than as a continuum. Treatments that reduce densities below 150 trees per acre are at a lower risk for stress related mortality. Under Alternative A, all treatments except Mexican Spotted Owl protected areas would provide the degree of density reduction necessary to produce a reduction risk that would be sustained for 4 to 5 decades following treatment. Under Alternative C, 1,371 of these acres would not achieve this threshold.

Landscapes dominated by a particular condition (e.g. pole-size pine) have limited diversity. Horizontal diversity increases when there are a variety of structural stages. The value of small forest openings as forage habitat for wildlife is enhanced if cover is nearby. In an effort to enhance within stand diversity, some acres will receive uneven-age group selection treatments. This will create patches of large trees, dense trees and no trees in close proximity to each other. This type of small-scale diversity is probably a natural constituent of Southwest conifers. Past treatments in the Woody Ridge project area emphasized only even-aged harvests with uniform tree spacing. This is the first project to emphasize uneven-age management over many acres. Alternative C limits uneven-age goals in 23% of the uneven-age treatment stands. With a cap in place, openings for seedlings/saplings (regeneration) cannot be achieved.

Two letters (Grand Canyon Trust and GFFP) suggested that I choose the portion of Alternative C that would place a cap on those stands where a cap would have little or no difference in the ability to achieve desired conditions (82% of the treated stands). The letters state public perceptions of removing significant numbers of large trees. Taking this course of action would do little to reduce the total number of trees greater than 16 inches removed. In reading other letters submitted on the topic of large trees, the concern seems to be a fear that those trees nearest to large tree characteristics are cut and that future large tree and old growth would be compromised. The EA clearly shows that future large trees and old growth stands are maintained and enhanced, even with the cutting of some black bark pine greater than 16 inches.

I asked the ID team to analyze Alternative C so I could make a detailed comparison between the options of choosing a cap versus not choosing a cap. There is no rationale for implementing a cap on areas where it makes little difference, and where the number of trees greater than 16 inches retained is minute.

Public interest in the Woody project has been low. Only 25 people attended the open house. Only one small public service type announcement has appeared in the newspaper and no articles have been written. Only 18 letters and e-mails were received related to the proposed action. Only 5 letters were received in response to the Environmental Assessment. I understand that four of the five letters are from organizations that represent organization members. But without

personal interest and contact from individuals or the media I do not believe that public perception is as great a concern some have indicated.

I appreciate the GFFP and Grand Canyon Trusts interest in being considerate of public perception, and I can understand why they suggested this combined alternative option. However, without an ecological reason that supports the public perception, I would rather not limit the implementation with a cap where it is not needed or jeopardize fully attaining desired conditions on the entire project area.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

Context. This project is a site-specific action that by itself does not have international, national, region-wide, or statewide importance. The discussion of the significance criteria that follows applies to the intended action and is within the context of local importance in the area associated with the Woody Ridge project area.

Intensity. The following discussion is organized around the Ten Significance Criteria described in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations (40 CFR 1508.27).

1. The analysis considered both beneficial and adverse effects. As described in Chapter 3 of the EA, impacts from this project are both beneficial and adverse. The adverse effects of thinning, prescribed fire, road obliteration, trail construction and temporary road construction are minor in nature and will not impair land productivity. These effects are short-term noise, smoke and human disturbance to wildlife, and short term soil disturbance that is not expected to cause soil erosion beyond the project area, and is expected to primarily remain on-site. Long-term effects are beneficial for most species habitat and forest ecosystem health. Habitat including the amount and location of forage and cover is improved for most species. Future forest structure follows the Forest Plan with a greater percentage of the landscape containing large trees. Fire cycles are returned to intervals more closely resembling pre-settlement frequencies. The beneficial and adverse effects are discussed in *Chapter 3*.

2. There are no known adverse impacts to public safety. Standard Forest Service requirements will be used for all activities. There are no known adverse impacts to public safety as stated in Chapter 3 of the EA.

3. No unique characteristics of the geography, such as cultural resources and wetlands, will be adversely affected.

There are no unique characteristics of geography on the project area. Although cultural resources sites exist, they are similar to sites found throughout the region and consist of limited-activity lithic scatters, probably representing temporary camps. Wetlands such as Rogers Lake are not affected by project activities.

4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. The effects of the project are limited to the Woody Ridge project area. While some people have disagreed with certain parts of the project, no person has provided evidence that the

environmental effects of the project have been wrongly predicted; therefore the effects are not likely to be controversial.

5. The degree of possible effects on the human environment are not highly uncertain, nor are there unique or unknown risks involved. The actions described in this decision are not new. The Forest Service has a long history of implementing these activities on this and other areas of the Coconino National Forest. These actions have been applied elsewhere on similar soil and vegetation types. The effects are not uncertain, unique or unknown.

6. Site specific actions found as part of this decision do not set a precedent for future actions, which may have significant effects, nor does this represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. A decision to implement this decision does not establish any future precedent for other actions within or outside of the project area. Future actions will be evaluated through the NEPA process and will stand on their own as to the environmental effects and project feasibility.

7. These actions are not related to other actions that, when combined, will have significant impacts. Cumulative effects are documented in *Chapter 3* of the EA. There is no off-site soil erosion, impacts to the overall watershed or changes to forest vegetation that would be cumulative to impacts from other activities. Effects to air quality are monitored and controlled through ADEQ regulations. There are no adverse effects to cultural resources and therefore no cumulative effect. Effects to wildlife habitat are described in detail in Chapter 3 of the EA and are generally minor and do not cause significant effects when considered with other activities in the general area.

8. This decision will not contribute to the loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources. There are no significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources on National Forest lands within the project area. The Arboretum of Flagstaff is located within the project area on private lands and there are no direct effects from project activities. Indirect effects may be short-term smoke impacts, which are expected to be minimal. Fire hazard reduction decreases the risk of loss from wildfire. The Naval Observatory is located adjacent to National Forest lands and is affected similarly to the Arboretum.

9. The US Fish & Wildlife Service consultation has completed. Possible effects to Federally listed wildlife species were analyzed in the Forest Service's Biological Assessment and Evaluation. T&E species were addressed through consultation with USFWS. The USFWS has concluded that implementation of the project would have no effect on loach minnows, razorback sucker, black footed ferret or jaguar. USFWS also concluded that implementation of the project may affect bald eagle, spiketail and MSO, but is not likely to adversely affect these species or their critical habitat. Therefore, no significant effects to threatened or endangered species of plants or animals or habitat critical for the management of these species, are anticipated. A summary of effects is located in *Chapter 3* of the EA. A Biological Evaluation is complete (PRD#138).

10. This decision does not violate or threaten to violate Federal, State, or local laws, or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. Chapter 2 of the EA lists Federal and State laws related to this project. There is not conflict with any Federal or State or local law.

Staff from the City, County and State have participated in planning for this project and had no concerns.

I find that implementing Alternative A does not constitute a major Federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment in either context or intensity. I have made this determination after considering both positive and negative effects, as well as direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of this action and reasonably foreseeable future actions.

I have found that the context of the environmental impacts of this decision is limited to the local area and is not significant. I have also determined that the severity of these impacts is not significant.

OTHER FINDINGS

This decision meets the intent of and complies with the Coconino National Forest Land Management Plan.

Biological Evaluations and consultation with US Fish and Wildlife Service is complete. Cultural Resources Clearance and consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer is complete. The Decision also complies with Arizona State laws regarding natural resource protection, including but not limited to water quality, as well as county and city resource protection measures.

IMPLEMENTATION OF DECISION

If no appeals are filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period. When appeals are filed, implementation may occur on, but not before, the 15th business day following the date of the last appeal disposition.

DECISION SUBJECT TO APPEAL

This decision is subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to 36 CFR 215 (June 4, 2003) and 251 (251 for permittee's only). The appeal must be filed (regular mail, fax, email, hand-delivery or express delivery) with the Appeal Deciding Officer. Written comments must be submitted to Appeal Deciding Official: Forest Supervisor, USDA Forest Service, Coconino National Forest, 1824 S. Thompson St., Flagstaff, AZ 86001. Fax number is (928) 527-3620. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered appeals are: 7:30 AM to 4:30 PM Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as email message, plain text (txt), rich text format (.rtf), and Word (.doc) to appeals-southwestern-coconino@fs.fed.us. Only those who submit timely and substantive comments during the notice and official comment period on the EA will be accepted appellants. To be eligible for appeal, each individual or representative from each organization submitting

substantive comments must either sign the comments or verify identity upon request. All commenter should review the 36 CFR 215.6 regulations for detail on comment requirements.

Appeals, including attachments, must be filed within 45 days from the publication date of this notice in the *Arizona Daily Sun*, the newspaper of record. The publication date in the *Arizona Daily Sun*, newspaper of record, is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by another source.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is an equal opportunity provider and employer. For further information, contact Gene Waldrip or Alvin Brown at Peaks Ranger District, 5075 N Hwy 89, Flagstaff, AZ 86004, or phone 928.526.0866, or email arbrown@fs.fed.us

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Coconino National Forest

Woody Ridge Forest Health Project

